

12. How the Puritans help us know God better: meditating on Scripture

Introduction

As we begin let's read aloud God's Word to us in **Psalm 77**:

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me. ² In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. ³ When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. ⁴ You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. ⁵ I consider the days of old, the years long ago. ⁶ I said, "Let me remember my song in the night; let me meditate in my heart." Then my spirit made a diligent search: ⁷ "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? ⁸ Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? ⁹ Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" ¹⁰ Then I said, "I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High." ¹¹ I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. ¹² I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds. ¹³ Your way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God? ¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders; you have made known your might among the peoples. ¹⁵ You with your arm redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. ¹⁶ When the waters saw you, O God, when the waters saw you, they were afraid; indeed, the deep trembled. ¹⁷ The clouds poured out water; the skies gave forth thunder; your arrows flashed on every side. ¹⁸ The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lighted up the world; the earth trembled and shook. ¹⁹ Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen. ²⁰ You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

In our Church History survey we're pausing again in the 1600s to take encouragement from the Puritans. We're going to ask this question: *How can the Puritans help us know God better?* And what we're going to consider today is **the theory and practice of Biblical meditation**.

1. The problem: I have a daily battle with in-dwelling SIN

You could put it another way: there is a chasm between the God I confess and the God my life displays. Which makes every Christian into a hypocrite. I am! In this session I'm chiefly speaking to myself. But you can listen in too if you want.

Or look at the problem another way. Psalm 119:11 says: *"I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you."* But I do still sin.

The sinful nature – the flesh – is so strong. Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death? Praise be to God for the Lord Jesus Christ – for his death and his resurrection. For, I know I'm not going to be sin-less this side of glory.

But how CAN I sin *less*. Psalm 119:11 does point us both to the problem and the solution: do we know what it is to store up God's Word in our hearts, in such a way that it is transformative? To use the Bible's word: Do we know what it is to *meditate* upon the Word of God?

Stephen Charnock was a great Puritan preacher and teacher. He's best known for his massive lectures on the *Existence and attributes of God*, given in the mid-17th century in a non-conformist church on Bishopsgate in the City of London. Here he introduces us to the solution – and to the problem:

“Meditate on this power of God, and press it often upon your minds. **We conclude many things of God that we do not practically suck the comfort of, for want of deep thoughts of it and frequent inspection into it.** We believe God to be true, yet distrust him; we acknowledge him powerful, yet fear the motion of every straw. Many truths, though assented to in our understandings, are kept under hatches by corrupt affections, and have not their due influence, because they are not brought forth into the open air of our souls by meditation... A strong God, and a weak faith in omnipotence, do not suit well together.”
(Stephen Charnock, *Existence and attributes of God*, pp102-103)

A caveat before we go on: **don't ignore the Spirit's work, even as we work hard.** The things of God are taught *by* God. We need His Spirit to get His Word inside of us. That's his job. In this session we're thinking about *our* responsibility to meditate on God's Word. That's our privilege and responsibility. But we mustn't think at the end of the day that it's only our work.

Nevertheless, the Puritans can help us get God's Word... into our hearts... such that it makes a difference. They can help us because they give us a uniquely rich understanding not only of the Bible, but also of us. A doctor needs to understand both the medicine and the patient. The Puritans give us both.

Before we think about meditating on Scripture let's ask a question (which we'll see is very relevant to the practice of meditation)...

2. WHAT ARE YOU LIKE? Reasonable... affectionate... and fallen

Here's a Biblical anthropology – or doctrine of humankind – as given by a typical Puritan.

- **God made us reasonable / rational**

God calls us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. For our purposes notice this: he made us with minds. We are not like the animals driven only by base instincts: where the next meal or mate comes from. We have reasonable or rational souls. This distinguishes us from the animals.

Yes, our minds are deeply messed up by sin. But truth matters to us. Logic matters. Order. Understanding.

But that's not all. We aren't just thinking machines...

- **God made us with “affections”**

When the Puritans spoke about “affections” they meant something like “emotions” – but vastly more intense. When our senses perceive something we respond to it. And depending on what we are perceiving (and our ability to perceive it correctly) we are strongly inclined either towards it or away from it. Those inclinations – strong attraction or strong revulsion – are the affections at work.

Put it another way: we are desiring creatures. We find some things good and beautiful... but other things we find revolting and repulsive. Try to think for a moment: when did your heart last “go out” to someone... or something... in love and desire? Or when was it last that your guts were churned with repulsion at someone or something?

The affections are really, really important. Because *a human being will only do what he or she desires*. Yes, our affections – our desires – are deeply messed up by sin. But in God’s goodness we remain affectionate creatures.

More accurately...

- **God made us with “reasonable affections”.**

That is, you can distinguish reason and affections – and it’s helpful to do so that we might more clearly understand what we’re really like. But you can’t actually separate them. Because human beings can’t be chopped up into “bits.”

The reason and the affections work together like this:

- Our senses apprehend something. They pass that data to the mind. The mind assesses that thing against the criteria of truth and goodness. That assessment determines how we respond. Good and true things we LOVE and DELIGHT in. The most good and most true things we MOST delight in.

Notice that the mind is in charge. But it is inseparable from and harnessed to our affections. Hence it’s helpful to talk of the human soul in terms of “reasonable affections.”

Most of the time the interplay of reason and affections goes on subconsciously. We’re not aware of it. And – crucially – sin has messed it all up

- **Sin has messed up our reason, our affections, and their relationship**

Imagine an un-converted person. In His terrifying judgement, God has given that person over to a de-based mind (Romans 1:28). Our mental ability to assess what is good & true and what is wicked & false is screwed up.

Another key part of sin sees our *affections over-rule our minds*. Sometimes, in our sin, we do become animal-like: our cravings for immediate bodily desire overrule truth and goodness. Truly, we become like a beast.

Maybe the mind does say, “Don’t love that – it isn’t good or true.” But the affections over-rule and incline us towards that thing as if it were good and true, even though it isn’t.

Or where the mind should say, “Don’t love that thing AS MUCH as you do – because you’re giving it more delight than you should”, the affections over-rule and allow us to overly-delight in something. Isn’t that often what idolatry is? Not necessarily loving and craving something that is intrinsically evil, but over-valuing something that can be good.

What a sinful mess we are! And remember: the problem isn’t “my affections” or “my mind.” Those are different faculties within *me*. I’m the problem!

So what? Why is it worth considering this?...

3. We need to get God's Word INSIDE OF people who are rational, affectionate and fallen

Our aim is that God's powerful Word gets into us... that we incline toward the Lord and to His things... and that we are repulsed by sin, the world and the devil. Therefore, knowing how God made me and what sin has done to me matters. It will **affect the way in which we speak God's truth**. We need to bring God's word to bear deeply on both our minds and our affections – bearing in mind sin's disordering effect – if we're going to be transformed by the Word.

Consider for a moment...

- **Warning: what happens if you *only* address the affections? Or the mind?**

Short answer: we de-humanise ourselves and each other. We're no longer treating people as God has made us.

If we only address the affections we have stepped into the realm of manipulation. If we look for an experience that is not founded on the truth... or even worse, if we look to manipulate an experience in others... then we are only going to do harm. We are treating people as if they do not have minds. We are treating them as if they are not human. Any spiritual experience that bypasses the mind or does not address the mind *cannot* be a Christian spiritual experience.

But if we only address the mind we are in danger of being dull and ineffective. In a different way we have ceased to treat people as fully human. We are not thinking machines or robots. We are creatures made to delight in things – to behold glory and go “wow”!

- **Therefore, we need God's Word with maximum truth...**

We need to hear God's voice clearly, with maximum truth and maximum clarity. We need the truth of God to teach us about Jesus, about the world, about ourselves.

We need God's truth to reveal those things which our eyes cannot perceive: heaven and hell, angels and demons, the Spirit of God, the Son's present rule in glory.

We need the truth of God to teach us about consequences. Rational creatures care about consequences. If you trust in Christ then this is the outcome. If you reject Christ you go to hell. If you walk a way of wisdom... or of folly... this is where you end up.

But that's not all...

- **... and we need God's truth with maximum power**

The aim is that God's truth should persuade our minds, and move our affections – and so penetrate to our wills. We need to take God's truth and preach it to ourselves (and to others) in such a way that our affections are moved and we incline strongly to the things of God and strongly away from sin/world/devil.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones famously said that what we need is: “logic on fire.” Or to put it another way: the world is in colour, but the Bible is in black and white. We need to make the Bible go radioactive... become technicolour in our hearts and minds.

Or from another angle: the Bible *is* the word of God. It is weighty and loud and powerful and awesome. It is only sin that mutes it to us. But sin does mute the Bible and amplify the world. How do we turn up the volume?

That's why the New England Puritan, Jonathan Edwards, said this about his pastoral responsibility:
"I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as possibly I can, provided that they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with." (Jonathan Edwards, *Some thoughts concerning the revival*)

That's a big introduction! How then should we meditate on God's Word – given that we need maximum truth and maximum affective power? Let's think about Biblical meditation in practice.

4. What IS Biblical meditation, and why does it matter?

Here's a simple definition: "talking to yourself about God." Not everyone is called to preach sermons to other people. But every Christian *is* called to preach sermons to himself!

We distinguish Biblical meditation from various forms of eastern and pagan meditation which have to do with *emptying* your mind. In the Bible, however, we are encouraged to fill our minds. Indeed, the Hebrew verb is very like the verb "to mumble," which immediately pictures a believer quietly talking to themselves about the Lord.

Here are some Puritan definitions:

Thomas Watson said it is "a holy exercise of the mind whereby we bring the truths of God to remembrance, and do seriously ponder upon them and apply them to ourselves."

Edmund Calamy wrote, "A true meditation is when a man doth so meditate of Christ as to get his *heart* inflamed with the love of Christ; so meditate of the Truths of God, as to be transformed into them; and so meditate of sin as to get his heart to hate sin."

Thomas Manton wrote: "Meditation is a middle sort of duty between the word and prayer, and hath respect to both. The word feedeth meditation, and meditation feedeth prayer; we must hear that we be not erroneous, and meditate that we be not barren. These duties must always go hand in hand; meditation must follow hearing and precede prayer."

Richard Baxter wrote: "As digestion is the turning of the raw food into chyle and blood, and spirits and flesh, so meditation, rightly managed, turneth the truths received and remembered, into warm affection, raised resolution, and holy and upright conversation." (The Saints Everlasting Rest, p295)

Baxter put great emphasis on the power of speech: "Our words have a great reflection and operation upon our own hearts. As they come from them, so they recoil to them." (Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory*, p342).

The Bible is FULL of commands to meditate. Psalm 77 – see above – is just one example. We're told explicitly that Asaph, the Psalmist, is engaging in meditation. And lots of the other verbs describing his activity in this psalm fit together to build a picture what he's doing. We learn that:

- Meditating is connected to the activity of *remembering* God (v3).
- Asaph *considers* what God has done in the past (v5).
- He addresses himself with *questions* based upon the character of God (vv7-9).

- He *remembers* the past deeds of God, committing himself to pondering upon them (vv11-12).
- And his meditation then *overflows into prayer*

5. Upon WHAT should we meditate?

Here are some Bible “helps” as we consider WHAT we should preach to ourselves. Get your Bible and skim through these verses: (Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:2, Psalm 77:12, Ps 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148):

- Joshua 1:8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.
- Psalm 1:2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.
- Psalm 77:12 I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds.
- Psalm 119:15-16, I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. ¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.
- Psalm 119:23, Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will meditate on your statutes.
- Psalm 119:27, Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works.
- Psalm 119:48 I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.
- Psalm 119:78 Let the insolent be put to shame, because they have wronged me with falsehood; as for me, I will meditate on your precepts.
- Psalm 119:148 My eyes are awake before the watches of the night, that I may meditate on your promise.

Above all, **God!!!** Here’s an encouragement from Richard Baxter. It’s a call to God-centred-ness that fits very well with what Asaph was doing in Psalm 77:

Though Christians therefore must study themselves, and keep up a care of their own salvation. Yet must they much more study God, his greatness, wisdom, and goodness, as shining in his works, and word, and in his Son, and as foreseen in the heavenly glory; and in this knowledge of God and Christ is life eternal. And nothing more tendeth to the holy advancement and perfection of the soul, than to keep continually due apprehensions of the divine nature, properties, and glorious appearances in his works upon the soul, so as it may become a constant course of contemplation, and the habit and constitution of the mind, and the constant guide of heart and life. (Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory*, p161)

Baxter emphasized dwelling on **God’s mercies** in our thoughts and prayers. Yes, it’s important to confess sins and ask help in our troubles. But he emphasised the health-bringing effect of **praise and thanksgiving**. That’s why the “melancholic” person – what we would call a depressed person – is in such a terrible place, because their illness makes it hard for them to see God’s goodness and so exercise thankfulness. Baxter even argues that praising God makes God’s people more holy:

The praises of God do exercise our highest graces: praise is the very breath of love, and joy, and gratitude: it tendeth to raise us above ourselves, and make our hearts to burn within us, while the glorious name of God is magnified: it hath the most pure, and spiritual, and elevating effect upon the soul; and therefore tendeth most effectually to make us more holy, by the increase of these graces. (*Christian Directory*, p149).

That's one reason why singing is so important – particularly singing to the Lord in praise and thanksgiving for all He is and all He has done. It gets truth into us in an affective way... and it does us good. Baxter especially points us to the Psalms:

“Read much those Scriptures which speak of the praises of God; especially the Psalms: and furnish your memories with store of those holy expressions of the excellencies of God, which he himself hath taught you in his word... No other dialect so well becometh the work of praise. God, that best knoweth himself, doth best teach us how to know and praise him. Be much in singing psalms of praise, and that with the most heart-raising cheerfulness and melody; especially in the holy assemblies.” (*Christian Directory*, 150).

“Especially let the Lord's day be principally spent in praises and thanksgivings for the work of our redemption, and the benefits thereof... The thankful and praiseful commemoration of the work of man's redemption, is the special work of the day.” (*Christian Directory*, 150).

What do you do when your Christian life is a mess? Here's what John Owen had to say in answer to that question (or as he put it: “How may we recover from a decay of the principle of grace?”).

If we would recover spiritual life, we must come as near as we can unto, and abide as much as we are able at, the well-head of life. Christ is the spring of our spiritual life; he is every way our life. It is in a derivation of life from Christ, and in conformity to him, that we must look for our spiritual life... We are to abide at the well-head of life by a frequency of the acts of faith upon the person of Christ. Faith is that grace, not only whereby we are implanted into Christ, but whereby we also abide in him... Wherefore, my brethren, let me give you this advice, - that you would night and day, upon your beds, in your ways, upon all occasions, have the exercise of faith upon the person of Christ; faith working by a view of him as represented in the gospel, by trust in him, and by invocation of him... labour to have your hearts filled with a love to Jesus Christ, as there is in him made a representation of all divine excellencies... Add meditation hereunto; study Christ more, and all the things of Christ; delight more in the hearing and preaching of Christ.” (John Owen, *Discourse 4*, in *Works*, vol. 9)

In other words, with your Bible open meditate hard on the Lord Jesus Christ. But what, in practice, does this look like?

6. In practice, HOW do we learn to meditate?

(i) Select a Bible verse or a Bible truth.

Obviously, we need to go beyond being mere listeners to God's Word. It takes time, commitment and practice. Maybe once a week on our own we need to set aside more time, purely to meditate on a truth from God's Word.

As we do that we'll find it easier to meditate on Scripture during the course of everyday life. As we develop a more Scriptural mind we'll look at *creation* and it will move us to Biblical meditation and prayer.

Or *God's providence* will more easily move us to meditation and prayer: for example, you're stuck in traffic on the motorway... you could either descend into rage or fear because of the appointment you're going to miss... or you think to yourself “What Scriptures does the Lord now

want me to believe?" (He's sovereign... I'm not in charge... waiting is hard... but isn't the whole Christian life like being stuck on a motorway). We'll only think like that if we're growing a Bible mind!

Certainly, we need to listen to preaching in church with a meditation in mind. Pray at the time of preaching: "Lord, do this word in me... in us." And afterwards, start that meditation process: consider what is the verse or truth you need to feed on, in order to wring out of God's Word all the nutrition that you can find for your soul.

(ii) Memorize it.

Maybe you write it out repeatedly by hand... or repeat it until you've got it logged away in your brain.

In passing, let me give you a nice little mnemonic from John Piper – his "IOUs":

"Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain." – Ps 119:36

"Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things in your law." – Ps 119:18

"Unite my heart to fear your name." – Ps 86:11

"Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days." – Ps 90:14

(iii) Talk to yourself about it.

Ask some simple questions...

- What does it mean?
- How does it speak to me? To my family? To my church?
- Why might I find this hard to believe? Or to obey?
- What good will come if I am able to believe this and live in the light of it?
- How do I see the praiseworthiness of the Lord? Or the sinfulness of sin?
- How am I encouraged to live for heaven, not for now/sin/self?

(iv) Talk to God about it.

How does this move me to praise and thanksgiving... to confession... to intercession?

(v) Live in the light of it.

What specific acts of obedience does it suggest? (Write them down... do them).

Carry that meditation into your day or your week.

(vi) Bring it to the front of your mind.

Later in the day... or when you know you're going to be tempted to sin... bring what you've considered to the front of your mind.

(vii) Consider sharing what you've learned with someone else.

What a blessing we would be if we shared the good things the Lord has been teaching us about with other brothers and sisters. (Why not make it a habit in your fellowship group to turn up each week ready to share something from God's word that you have been meditating upon).

Have a go...

You are really anxious about _____ . You decided to meditate on Philippians 4:4-7.

Philippians 4:4-7. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.